

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: Falling through the cracks

Poverty follows students to school

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — Like the local group Community Reinvesting in Educational Opportunities, we believe that San Angelo is a great place to raise a family. We say this with pause, however, because our studies at Community Development Initiatives reveal some alarming trends involving our city's young people.

In 2009, for instance, almost 14 percent of families in San Angelo had incomes that fell below the official federal poverty threshold. Of course, poverty does not visit randomly upon families and the children who depend on them. In our community, as in Texas and the nation, families with children in poverty are more likely to be black or Hispanic, and single-parent families.

But the sad fact is that families in poverty include about one of every four children in San Angelo who live with their married mothers and fathers. Still, the knowledge that poverty ravages minority and single-parent families at higher rates is well anchored in popular views on the subject.

Perhaps this is one reason why mean-spirited citizens cling to the notion that when a child lives in poor conditions, the problem is created by a "welfare queen" and "deadbeat dad" who are not married to one another in this stereotype.

Apart from a few tragic instances that might fit this mold, the idea hopelessly condemns vulnerable children to a lifetime of negative outcomes and also fails to square the facts about most families in poverty. Beyond reach of the ugly outrage flamed by images of welfare schemers are key facts about poor families in San Angelo showing that the vast majority (nearly 90 percent) do not receive public assistance income on any regular basis, and 75 percent have one or more adult members who work.

Among the devastating consequences for children growing up in poverty is failure at school. The 2010 class at San Angelo Independent School District had lost 11 percent of its members who started high school four years earlier in ninth grade when it took the stage to celebrate graduation. This longitudinal dropout rate, as it is called, was

actually a good improvement over the 14 percent dropout rate for the class of 2009 a year earlier.

However, the local rate is nearly four percentage points higher than the statewide level, even as Texas ranks near the top of states when it comes to kids dropping out of school.

Back in San Angelo, local schools have particular difficulties holding onto so-called Title I students who participate in school programs specifically aimed to improve the achievement of disadvantaged children. Numbers also are high for students deemed "at-risk" of dropping out because they demonstrate one or more out of several key academic or behavior adjustment problems going as far back as kindergarten or 1st grade.

Children living in poverty matters; first because it connects to dropping school and then to significantly decreased earning capacity, higher reliance on Medicaid, welfare and public charity, and greater involvement with criminal activity. Large numbers of children in poverty, as in San Angelo, means a lifetime of hurt for the children and for the community.

Helping hands

Thankfully, there is no shortage of social entrepreneurs and community-based organizations seeking to address problems of child poverty in our city. Many churches provide aid and comfort to needy families as well as constructive youth programs or activities, and a review of the community's nonprofit organizations reveals many carrying out missions to help troubled families and children with services ranging from shelter to food aid, counseling, scholarships and a range of positive youth development activities.

Some local groups have recognized that the school system alone cannot solve the problems created by the city's high dropout rate, so they seek to form partnerships and coalitions to keep kids in school.

Community Reinvesting in Educational Opportunities is one such group. Using the awareness that mentoring programs can contribute to better school performance, reduced alcohol and drug use, and fewer violent acts by school-age children, CREO has partnered with the school district to mentor disadvantaged and at-risk students in an effort to help reduce the system's dropout rate.

CREO also is teaming with a number of other community partners including the NAACP and the Southside Lions Club to provide computers at no cost to disadvantaged students in a project to encourage children to engage with technology in way that stresses academic performance, creates an active learning mindset and spreads from the students to friends and other family members.

Café con Leche is another program that CREO is engaging in collaboration with the San Angelo P-16+ Education Partnership based at the Chamber of Commerce.

Originating from a similar program at the University of Texas Institute for Public School Initiatives, the major goal of Café con Leche is to engage families in a "kitchen table" manner that stimulates a learning culture in the home and excites students about their potential for college.

Café con Leche sessions stress that college is accessible and affordable despite social, economic and academic barriers.

These and other community groups working together to keep students in school are inspiring progress in the community, and we look forward to times when San Angelo's child poverty and school dropout rates are abated.

Young adult crisis

But there is one vulnerable group that appears to draw little — too little — support for a helping hand up. These are not children in danger of dropping out of school and into the misfortunes that follow. They are the young adults who already have fallen through the cracks by not completing high school.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that about 1,500 San Angelo families were headed by people under age 25 as of 2009. About half of these had a married couple leading the family, according to the estimate, while the other half was headed mostly by single females. The estimated poverty rate for this group of families was 30.5 percent compared to the 14 percent poverty rate for all families in the city.

At the same time, people under age 25 comprised about one of every four unemployed workers and had an unemployment rate that was nearly double the level for the overall workforce. These are young adults striving to gain a toehold in the community and, ironically, they are now raising some of the children in poverty that so concern the school system and groups such as CREO.

They are a truly vulnerable population of individuals and families in a community that offers them little in the way of a hand up and a pathway out.

One way some 270 communities, including five in Texas, have approached the task of offering a pathway to progress for vulnerable young adults and families is by developing collaboration projects under the national YouthBuild umbrella.

In 2010, nearly 10,000 young adults under age 25 across the nation were participants in YouthBuild collaborations. They were the "hard cases" in their communities. All were poor; nearly all were high school dropouts; most had previously received public assistance; many had been in the criminal courts; and young adult parents comprised nearly one-third.

The secret to YouthBuild is that it puts young adults to work full-time, paid at a modest wage, and focused on two objectives: completing the high school diploma or GED and learning skills on-the-job.

Nationally, about 78,000 young adults have completed YouthBuild since 1994 and 25 percent of those went on to enroll in college. Follow-up studies show that, years after completing the program, three out of four YouthBuild participants were either in college or regularly employed.

Something along the lines of the YouthBuild model may be a good investment for a collaboration of individuals, groups and agencies in San Angelo to make in the most vulnerable and striving young adults of the community.

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